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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000831

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SUBJECT: Niger: EmbOffs Meet with Cheiffou Amadou

Ref: Niamey 00511

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11. (SBU) Summary: On October 21, Pol Officer and Pol Specialist met with Cheiffou Amadou, President of the Social Democratic Rally (RSD). Cheiffou admitted that turnout for legislative elections held on October 20 was low in some areas, but blamed it on the harvest season. He added that ECOWAS had waited too long to request the Government of Niger (GON) to postpone the October 20 legislative elections, which had already been funded and organized. He asserted that the GON will continue to dialogue with ECOWAS in hopes of finding a compromise on the current situation. Cheiffou further stated that all options to address the current political situation are on the table and that the GON is willing to share power with the opposition. He also cited the ineffectiveness of economic sanctions on governments, claiming that the masses instead would suffer. End Summary.

RSD Party Now Aligned with Ruling Party

12. (SBU) Social Democratic Rally (RSD), a former opposition party, recently aligned itself with the National Movement for a Developing Society (MNSD), the ruling party. On June 17, Embassy officials met with members of RSD at the Ambassador's residence (reftel). During the event, RSD members asserted that they were strong supporters of democratic principles, and were in favor of the August 4 referendum to change the constitution. They did not support President Tandja's extension in office by three years, however, as they found no justification for him to do so.

13. (SBU) When probed about their party's reasoning for a change in political stance, Cheiffou stated that when the "people" voted for a new constitution, they also voted to allow President Tandja to stay in office for an additional three years. He went on to state that he supports the people and their decision, and added that he is only supporting what his people want. Nonetheless, he believes that the current constitution is flawed. Cheiffou stated that having unlimited presidential terms and not having a limited age requirement to run for president leaves open the possibility of having a president stay in office for life.

Cheiffou Remarks on Low Voter Turnout in Urban Areas

14. (SBU) Cheiffou pointed out that turnout for the elections was low, especially in the morning, and cited the harvest season as the dominant factor. He said that turnout was higher in the afternoon until the closing of polls at 6:30 p.m. He also stated that the low

turnout in cities like Niamey was not unusual, recalling a similar turnout for the 2004 presidential elections. When pressed for numbers, Cheiffou estimated that turnout in the rural areas was 40-50 percent, and only 10-20 percent in urban areas.

Demands by ECOWAS Late; Election Bound by Constitution

15. (SBU) Cheiffou stated that the last-minute request by ECOWAS to postpone legislative election was "untimely." He stated that the GON had already spent public funds in anticipation of the elections.

He added that volunteers and government officials had already been mobilized. Cheiffou added that candidates spent large sums of money campaigning, and postponing the elections would have been unfair to them. Cheiffou also said that "It would be unconstitutional for President Tandja to change the date of the legislative elections." According to the new constitution, "legislative elections shall take place in October 2009 at the latest."

16. (SBU) Cheiffou stated that ECOWAS and the international community should have placed more pressure on the opposition to participate in legislative elections. He went on to say that the international community seemed to miss the point on the role of the opposition. Cheiffou maintains contact with many of the opposition parties and had urged them to participate in the legislative elections. He believes that participating is their only way in having a say in the government. He added that several opposition parties did in fact participate.

GON Willing to Share Power - "Anything is Negotiable"

17. (SBU) Cheiffou stated that the GON is willing to negotiate with the opposition. He said that "anything is negotiable" except for returning to the old constitution. He stated that the opposition had its chance to state its grievances during the referendum, but

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that time has now passed. He stated that the GON is willing to share power. When pressed for specifics, he said that the opposition could hold seats in the future Senate, municipal bodies, and the cabinet. Cheiffou maintained these positions are what constitute the government. When asked about the possibility of holding presidential elections, he responded that "all options were on the table." (Note: the new constitution states "the incumbent president shall remain in office until the presidential election that will take place in December 2012" (Article 154) and "...the provisions of Article 154...are not subject to any change." (Article 152). End note.)

Sanctions Not Effective, Harm the Masses

18. (SBU) Cheiffou stated that sanctions imposed by the international community would only prove to worsen the lives of ordinary Nigeriens. He stated that the harvest season was already bad, and that sanctions would only prove to worsen the situation. He added, "sanctions in no country have ever worked to change the political situation. Dialogue is what Niger needs."

Comment

19. (SBU) Cheiffou's demands appear unattainable. The opposition does not recognize the new constitution; therefore, their participation in legislative elections would have given legitimacy to the current government. Furthermore, his notion that ECOWAS should have informed the GON of its disapproval of the legislative elections at an earlier time rings hollow, as for several months ECOWAS and the African Union voiced their condemnation of Niger's announced legislative elections, having suggested to GON officials a postponement of the elections to a later date in order to facilitate dialogue with the opposition. The GON may have begun to realize that economic sanctions imposed by the international community could have an adverse effect on the Nigerien people during an expected poor harvest. End comment.

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